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FM IRAN RPO DUBAI  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0037  
INFO RUCNIRA/IRAN COLLECTIVE  
RUEHDIR/IRAN RPO DUBAI 0030  
RHEFDHP/DIA DHP-1 WASHINGTON DC  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC  
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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 IRAN RPO DUBAI 000021

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PARIS FOR WALLER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/14/2016  
TAGS: [IR](#) [PGOV](#)  
SUBJECT: ELECTIONS AND POWER ALIGNMENTS IN IRAN

REF: A. RPO DUBAI 0008, B. RPO DUBAI 0018

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CLASSIFIED BY: Jillian Burns, Director, Iran Regional Presence  
Office, Department of State.  
REASON: 1.4 (d)

1.(S//NF) Summary: The vetting of candidates for the December 15 Assembly of Experts and municipal elections in Iran may be almost more significant than the elections themselves, because they give a clearer view into power struggles and alignments within the Iranian government. In a world of shifting political alliances, the elections are forcing many to support or ally themselves with a particular group or person, revealing to a greater degree the level of support that the various groups or persons can command. Due to heavy-handed vetting by the Guardian Council, control of the Assembly of Experts will remain in the hands of traditional conservatives, who on the whole support Supreme Leader Khamenei. Some claim vetting results reflect the declining influence of President Ahmadinejad. Allies of his and hard-line cleric Mesbah-Yazdi's were largely excluded from the Assembly of Experts elections, and reformers opposed to Ahmadinejad were approved in large numbers for the Tehran municipal elections. One former high-level MFA official told IRPO that Supreme Leader Khamenei specifically asked Expediency Council Chair Rafsanjani to stand in the Assembly of Experts elections, presumably to balance against Mesbah-Yazdi. The former official noted that the results of Tehran municipal council elections will reflect Ahmadinejad's popularity level, predicting that some of the president's supporters will be elected, but not many. End summary.

Khamenei attempts to neutralize a possible threat to his leadership

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2.(C) Guardian Council vetting of candidates for the Assembly of Experts election predictably excluded a number of reformers, but supporters of the hard-line conservative cleric Mesbah-Yazdi, including the cleric's son, were also largely disqualified from candidacy. This follows speculation all year that Mesbah-Yazdi - who is closely allied with President Ahmadinejad - was attempting to gain control of the Assembly of Experts with an

eye toward replacing Khamenei as Supreme Leader, either succeeding Khamenei or possibly forcing him out of office.

3.(S//NF) One former high-level Ministry of Foreign Affairs official from the Khatami government told IRPO that Supreme Leader Khamenei specifically asked Expediency Council Chair Rafsanjani to stand in the Assembly of Experts election, presumably with the intent of balancing against Mesbah-Yazdi. (The former official's views on the current political situation are reported septel.) The former official commented that despite a longstanding rivalry between the two men, Khamenei and Rafsanjani are pillars of the system, and they cooperate when necessary. The former official alleged that the vetting of allies of Mesbah-Yazdi and Ahmadinejad from the Assembly of Experts election is a sign of the declining influence of President Ahmadinejad. Rafsanjani, wary of the possibility of another electoral loss and potential elections tampering by Ahmadinejad, agreed on condition that Khamenei make a public statement against interference in the elections. According to the former official, Ahmadinejad defied the Supreme Leader and orchestrated some tampering, such as tearing down of election banners. Asked whether fraud or electoral tampering was likely during the elections, the former official said the possibility of fraud was low, but did not give a clear reason for that opinion.

Tehran municipal elections a referendum on Ahmadinejad  
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4.(S//NF) The Tehran municipal council elections have turned into a political battleground between conservatives, with supporters of President Ahmadinejad on one side, and backers of Tehran Mayor Qalibaf on the other. The two sides have entered opposing electoral lists, and also compete with a third conservative list, comprised largely of traditional conservatives. Facing the divided conservatives in Tehran is a united list of reformist candidates, who may have a greater chance of success against a split conservative vote. The former official attached particular significance to the Tehran

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municipal council elections, saying they would serve as a referendum on Ahmadinejad. He predicted that some of Ahmadinejad's supporters would be elected to the Tehran council, but not many. Qalibaf supporters and reformists would make up the bulk of the council, he opined, saying it was also likely that Qalibaf would be confirmed as mayor for the next full term. Qalibaf would wield more influence if he is reconfirmed as mayor, he claimed, and balance against Ahmadinejad to a greater degree.

5.(S//NF) Comment: The former official's comments about Khamenei's request to Rafsanjani for help in balancing against Ahmadinejad and Mesbah-Yazdi illustrates the skilled behind-the-scenes political maneuvering that has kept Khamenei in his position for so long. His request to Rafsanjani and the exclusion of Mesbah-Yazdi's supporters from the Assembly of Experts elections, are indications that the Supreme Leader does consider Mesbah-Yazdi a possible threat to his position. Regarding electoral tampering, it will be interesting to see whether the former official's assertion that fraud is unlikely will hold true.

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